

## Chapter 22

### "What Is the Third Estate?"

(1789)

Abbé Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès

#### Introduction

In late 1788 and early 1789 the French were attempting to determine how to constitute the Estates General, which Louis XVI had ordered convened for the first time in almost 175 years. The main issue was the composition of the delegations to the traditional three houses (estates) of the Estates General. The conservative position, favored by the government and the nobility, maintained that each house should have an equal number of delegates, should sit and deliberate separately from the other houses, and ultimately should speak with one voice - in essence, that each house should have one vote. The obvious inequality of this position (140,000 nobles with one vote, 180,000 clergy with one vote, and 23.5 million commoners with one vote) galvanized many with more liberal ideals. One such critic of this system was the Abbé Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès (1748-1836). Despite his noble status and high ecclesiastical office, Sieyès identified with the third estate - that representing the common people of France - and was elected as a delegate from Paris. As the Revolution became more radical, Sieyès became more conservative and would later be instrumental in the coup which placed Napoleon Bonaparte at the head of the French government. In his polemical pamphlet, Sieyès castigates the "useless" nobility for being leeches on the body social of France and offers a radical reconceptualization of the political and social foundation of the French state and society. His pamphlet enunciates the liberal aspirations of the French middle class. Sieyès's pamphlet has long been considered a prime source on the political desires of the French bourgeoisie, used by Marxist historians to indicate the class conflict between nobility and bourgeoisie. Revisionist scholars have almost totally rejected the concept of a "bourgeois revolution" in favor of a broader (if less defined) interpretation that stresses the emergence of a new political culture that destroyed French absolutism and the society of orders.

#### Questions to Consider

- What is the third estate, according to Sieyès?
- In what ways could Sieyès's pamphlet be used by either the Marxist or the revisionist school of interpretation?

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What is necessary that a nation should subsist and prosper? Individual effort and public functions.

All individual efforts may be included in four classes:

1. Since the earth and the waters furnish crude products for the needs of man, the first class, in logical sequence, will be that of all families which devote themselves to agricultural labor.
2. Between the first sale of products and their consumption or use, a new manipulation, more or less repeated, adds to these products a second value more or less composite. In this manner human industry succeeds in perfecting the gifts of nature, and the crude product increases two-fold, ten-fold, one hundred-fold in value. Such are the efforts of the second class.
3. Between production and consumption, as well as between the various stages of production, a group of intermediary agents establish themselves, useful both to producers and consumers; these are the merchants and brokers: the brokers who, comparing incessantly the demands of time and place, speculate upon the profit of retention and transportation; merchants who are charged with

1 distribution, in the last analysis, either at wholesale or at retail. This species of utility  
2 characterizes the third class.

- 3 4. Outside of these three classes of productive and useful citizens, who are occupied with real  
4 objects of consumption and use, there is also need in a society of a series of efforts and pains,  
5 whose objects are directly useful or agreeable to the individual. This fourth class embraces all  
6 those who stand between the most distinguished and liberal professions and the less esteemed  
7 services of domestics.

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9 Such are the efforts which sustain society. Who puts them forth? The Third Estate.

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11 Public functions may be classified equally well, in the present state of affairs, under four  
12 recognized heads; the sword, the robe, the church and the administration. It would be superfluous  
13 to take them up one by one, for the purpose of showing that everywhere the Third Estate attends  
14 to nineteen-twentieths of them, with this distinction; that it is laden with all that which is really  
15 painful, with all the burdens which the privileged classes refuse to carry. Do we give the Third  
16 Estate credit for this? That this might come about, it would be necessary that the Third Estate  
17 should refuse to fill these places, or that it should be less ready to exercise their functions. The  
18 facts are well known. Meanwhile they have dared to impose a prohibition upon the order of the  
19 Third Estate. They have said to it: "Whatever may be your services, whatever may be your  
20 abilities, you shall go thus far; you may not pass beyond!" Certain rare exceptions, properly  
21 regarded, are but a mockery, and the terms which are indulged in on such occasions, one insult  
22 the more.

23  
24 If this exclusion is a social crime against the Third Estate; if it is a veritable act of hostility, could  
25 it perhaps be said that it is useful to the public weal? Alas! who is ignorant of the effects of  
26 monopoly? If it discourages those whom it rejects, is it not well known that it tends to render less  
27 able those whom it favors? Is it not understood that every employment from which free  
28 competition is removed, becomes dearer and less effective?

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30 In setting aside any function whatsoever to serve as an appanage for a distinct class among  
31 citizens, is it not to be observed that it is no longer the man alone who does the work that it is  
32 necessary to reward, but all the unemployed members of that same caste, and also the entire  
33 families of those who are employed as well as those who are not? Is it not to be remarked that  
34 since the government has become the patrimony of a particular class, it has been distended  
35 beyond all measure; places have been created, not on account of the necessities of the governed,  
36 but in the interests of the governing, etc., etc.? Has not attention been called to the fact that this  
37 order of things, which is basely and - I even presume to say - beastly respectable with us, when  
38 we find it in reading the History of Ancient Egypt or the accounts of Voyages to the Indies, is  
39 despicable, monstrous, destructive of all industry, the enemy of social progress; above all  
40 degrading to the human race in general, and particularly intolerable to Europeans, etc., etc.? But I  
41 must leave these considerations, which, if they increase the importance of the subject and throw  
42 light upon it, perhaps, along with the new light, slacken our progress.

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44 It suffices here to have made it clear that the pretended utility of a privileged order for the public  
45 service is nothing more than a chimera; that with it all that which is burdensome in this service is  
46 performed by the Third Estate; that without it the superior places would be infinitely better filled;  
47 that they naturally ought to be the lot and the recompense of ability and recognized services, and  
48 that if privileged persons have come to usurp all the lucrative and honorable posts, it is a hateful  
49 injustice to the rank and file of citizens and at the same time a treason to the public weal.

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51 Who then shall dare to say that the Third Estate has not within itself all that is necessary for the

1 information of a complete nation? It is the strong and robust man who has one arm still shackled.  
2 If the privileged order should be abolished, the nation would be nothing less, but something more.  
3 Therefore, what is the Third Estate? Everything; but an everything shackled and oppressed. What  
4 would it be without the privileged order? Everything, but an everything free and flourishing.  
5 Nothing can succeed without it, everything would be infinitely better without the others.  
6

7 It is not sufficient to show that privileged persons, far from being useful to the nation, cannot but  
8 enfeeble and injure it; it is necessary to prove further that the noble order does not enter at all into  
9 the social organization; that it may indeed be a burden upon the nation, but that it cannot of itself  
10 constitute a nation.  
11

12 In the first place, it is not possible in the number of all the elementary parts of a nation to find a  
13 place for the caste of nobles. I know that there are individuals in great number whom infirmities,  
14 incapacity, incurable laziness, or the weight of bad habits render strangers to the labors of society.  
15 The exception and the abuse are everywhere found beside the rule. But it will be admitted that the  
16 less there are of these abuses, the better it will be for the State. The worst possible arrangement of  
17 all would be where not alone isolated individuals, but a whole class of citizens should take pride  
18 in remaining motionless in the midst of the general movement, and should consume the best part  
19 of the product without bearing any part in its production. Such a class is surely estranged to the  
20 nation by its indolence.  
21

22 The noble order is not less estranged from the generality of us by its civil and political  
23 prerogatives.  
24

25 What is a nation? A body of associates, living under a common law, and represented by the same  
26 legislature, etc.  
27

28 Is it not evident that the noble order has privileges and expenditures which it dares to call its  
29 rights, but which are apart from the rights of the great body of citizens? It departs there from the  
30 common order, from the common law. So its civil rights make of it an isolated people in the midst  
31 of the great nation. This is truly imperium in imperio [a state within the state].  
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33 In regard to its political rights, these also it exercises apart. It has its special representatives,  
34 which are not charged with securing the interests of the people. The body of its deputies sit apart;  
35 and when it is assembled in the same hall with the deputies of simple citizens, it is nonetheless  
36 true that its representation is essentially distinct and separate: it is a stranger to the nation, in the  
37 first place, by its origin, since its commission is not derived from the people; then by its object,  
38 which consists of defending not the general, but the particular interest.  
39

40 The Third Estate embraces then all that which belongs to the nation; and all that which is not the  
41 Third Estate, cannot be regarded as being of the nation. What is the Third Estate? It is the whole.